

Chapter 16

Feeling him abstract, withdrawn from her, Helena experienced the dread of losing him. She was in his arms, but his spirit ignored her. That was insufferable to her pride. Yet she dared not disturb him--she was afraid. Bitterly she repented her of the giving way to her revulsion a little space before. Why had she not smothered it and pretended? Why had she, a woman, betrayed herself so flagrantly? Now perhaps she had lost him for good. She was consumed with uneasiness.

At last she drew back from him, held him her mouth to kiss. As he gently, sadly kissed her she pressed him to her bosom. She must get him back, whatever else she lost. She put her hand tenderly on his brow.

'What are you thinking of?' she asked.

'I?' he replied. 'I really don't know. I suppose I was hardly thinking anything.'

She waited a while, clinging to him, then, finding some difficulty in speech, she asked:

'Was I very cruel, dear?'

It was so unusual to hear her grieved and filled with humility that he

drew her close into him.

'It was pretty bad, I suppose,' he replied. 'But I should think neither of us could help it.'

She gave a little sob, pressed her face into his chest, wishing she had helped it. Then, with Madonna love, she clasped his head upon her shoulder, covering her hands over his hair. Twice she kissed him softly in the nape of the neck, with fond, reassuring kisses. All the while, delicately, she fondled and soothed him, till he was child to her Madonna.

They remained standing with his head on her shoulder for some time, till at last he raised himself to lay his lips on hers in a long kiss of healing and renewal--long, pale kisses of after-suffering.

Someone was coming along the path. Helena let him go, shook herself free, turned sharply aside, and said:

'Shall we go down to the water?'

'If you like,' he replied, putting out his hand to her. They went thus with clasped hands down the cliff path to the beach.

There they sat in the shadow of the uprising island, facing the restless water. Around them the sand and shingle were grey; there stretched a

long pale line of surf, beyond which the sea was black and smeared with star-reflections. The deep, velvety sky shone with lustrous stars.

As yet the moon was not risen. Helena proposed that they should lie on a tuft of sand in a black cleft of the cliff to await its coming. They lay close together without speaking. Each was looking at a low, large star which hung straight in front of them, dripping its brilliance in a thin streamlet of light along the sea almost to their feet. It was a star-path fine and clear, trembling in its brilliance, but certain upon the water. Helena watched it with delight. As Siegmund looked at the star, it seemed to him a lantern hung at the gate to light someone home. He imagined himself following the thread of the star-track. What was behind the gate?

They heard the wash of a steamer crossing the bay. The water seemed populous in the night-time, with dark, uncanny comings and goings.

Siegmund was considering.

'What was the matter with you?' he asked.

She leaned over him, took his head in her lap, holding his face between her two hands as she answered in a low, grave voice, very wise and old in experience:

'Why, you see, dear, you won't understand. But there was such a greyish

darkness, and through it--the crying of lives I have touched....'

His heart suddenly shrank and sank down. She acknowledged then that she also had helped to injure Beatrice and his children. He coiled with shame.

'....A crying of lives against me, and I couldn't silence them, nor escape out of the darkness. I wanted you--I saw you in front, whistling the Spring Song, but I couldn't find you--it was not you--I couldn't find you.'

She kissed his eyes and his brows.

'No, I don't see it,' he said. 'You would always be you. I could think of hating you, but you'd still be yourself.'

She made a moaning, loving sound. Full of passionate pity, she moved her mouth on his face, as a woman does on her child that has hurt itself.

'Sometimes,' she murmured, in a low, grieved confession, 'you lose me.'

He gave a brief laugh.

'I lose you!' he repeated. 'You mean I lose my attraction for you, or my hold over you, and then you--?'

He did not finish. She made the same grievous murmuring noise over him.

'It shall not be any more,' she said.

'All right,' he replied, 'since you decide it.'

She clasped him round the chest and fondled him, distracted with pity.

'You mustn't be bitter,' she murmured.

'Four days is enough,' he said. 'In a fortnight I should be intolerable to you. I am not masterful.'

'It is not so, Siegmund,' she said sharply.

'I give way always,' he repeated. 'And then--tonight!'

'Tonight, tonight!' she cried in wrath. 'Tonight I have been a fool!'

'And I?' he asked.

'You--what of you?' she cried. Then she became sad. 'I have little perverse feelings,' she lamented.

'And I can't bear to compel anything, for fear of hurting it. So I'm always pushed this way and that, like a fool.'

'You don't know how you hurt me, talking so,' she said.

He kissed her. After a moment he said:

'You are not like other folk. "Ihr Lascheks seid ein anderes Geschlecht." I thought of you when we read it.'

'Would you rather have me more like the rest, or more unlike, Siegmund? Which is it?'

'Neither,' he said. 'You are you.'

They were quiet for a space. The only movement in the night was the faint gambolling of starlight on the water. The last person had passed in black silhouette between them and the sea.

He was thinking bitterly. She seemed to goad him deeper and deeper into life. He had a sense of despair, a preference of death. The German she read with him--she loved its loose and violent romance--came back to his mind: 'Der Tod geht einem zur Seite, fast sichtbarlich, und jagt einem immer tiefer ins Leben.'

Well, the next place he would be hunted to, like a hare run down, was home. It seemed impossible the morrow would take him back to Beatrice.

'This time tomorrow night,' he said.

'Siegmond!' she implored.

'Why not?' he laughed.

'Don't, dear,' she pleaded.

'All right, I won't.'

Some large steamer crossing the mouth of the bay made the water dash a little as it broke in accentuated waves. A warm puff of air wandered in on them now and again.

'You won't be tired when you go back?' Helena asked.

'Tired!' he echoed.

'You know how you were when you came,' she reminded him, in tones full of pity. He laughed.

'Oh, that is gone,' he said.

With a slow, mechanical rhythm she stroked his cheek.

'And will you be sad?' she said, hesitating.

'Sad!' he repeated.

'But will you be able to fake the old life up, happier, when you go back?'

'The old life will take me up, I suppose,' he said.

There was a pause.

'I think, dear,' she said, 'I have done wrong.'

'Good Lord--you have not!' he replied sharply, pressing back his head to look at her, for the first time.

'I shall have to send you back to Beatrice and the babies--tomorrow--as you are now....'

""Take no thought for the morrow." Be quiet, Helena!' he exclaimed as the reality bit him. He sat up suddenly.

'Why?' she asked, afraid.

'Why!' he repeated. He remained sitting, leaning forward on the sand, staring intently at Helena. She looked back in fear at him. The moment terrified her, and she lost courage.

With a fluttered motion she put her hand on his, which was pressed hard on the sand as he leaned forward. At once he relaxed his intensity, laughed, then became tender.

Helena yielded herself like a forlorn child to his arms, and there lay, half crying, while he smoothed her brow with his fingers, and grains of sand fell from his palm on her cheek. She shook with dry, withered sobs, as a child does when it snatches itself away from the lancet of the doctor and hides in the mother's bosom, refusing to be touched.

But she knew the morrow was coming, whether or not, and she covered down on his breast. She was wild with fear of the parting and the subsequent days. They must drink, after tomorrow, separate cups. She was filled with vague terror of what it would be. The sense of the oneness and unity of their fates was gone.

Siegmund also was cowed by the threat of separation. He had more definite knowledge of the next move than had Helena. His heart was certain of calamity, which would overtake him directly. He shrank away. Wildly he beat about to find a means of escape from the next day and its consequences. He did not want to go. Anything rather than go back.

In the midst of their passion of fear the moon rose. Siegmund started to see the rim appear ruddily beyond the sea. His struggling suddenly ceased, and he watched, spellbound, the oval horn of fiery gold come up,

resolve itself. Some golden liquor dripped and spilled upon the far waves, where it shook in ruddy splashes. The gold-red cup rose higher, looming before him very large, yet still not all discovered. By degrees the horn of gold detached itself from the darkness at back of the waves. It was immense and terrible. When would the tip be placed upon the table of the sea?

It stood at last, whole and calm, before him; then the night took up this drinking-cup of fiery gold, lifting it with majestic movement overhead, letting stream forth the wonderful unwasted liquor of gold over the sea--a libation.

Siegmund looked at the shaking flood of gold and paling gold spread wider as the night upraised the blanching crystal, poured out farther and farther the immense libation from the whitening cup, till at last the moon looked frail and empty.

And there, exhaustless in the night, the white light shook on the floor of the sea. He wondered how it would be gathered up. 'I gather it up into myself,' he said. And the stars and the cliffs and a few trees were watching, too. 'If I have spilled my life,' he thought, 'the unfamiliar eyes of the land and sky will gather it up again.'

Turning to Helena, he found her face white and shining as the empty moon.